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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [EAIR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MURR SWEARS THAT AIRPORT IS SECURE

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4(d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) During an 8/25 meeting with Ambassador Feltman and poloff (notetaker), Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr pleaded with the Ambassador to help get the Israeli blockade of the airport lifted. He said the "siege" is perceived by many within the Cabinet as the US-backed "blackmailing" of Lebanon and could prove counterproductive in terms of other initiatives, such as the continuing LAF deployment, while driving Lebanon back into the arms of Syria. The Ambassador asked Murr if he has a clear plan for securing and monitoring all points of entry - airports, ports, and border crossings - into Lebanon. Murr presented a summary of the steps taken to date at Beirut International Airport, the Port of Beirut, and along the Lebanese-Syrian frontier. Taking full responsibility, he said that the airport is now "100 per cent secure" and can be reopened, whereas the port needs new scanning equipment but could be ready soon. Further, the 8/24 Cabinet decision authorizing PM Siniora to request foreign assistance means that the GOL can ask the German government to provide equipment, training, and support (though not supervision) under a UN flag along the border and at the port. Murr assured the Ambassador that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are fully capable and are already flexing their muscles to interdict the movement of illicit weapons. He believes that the Syrian decision on 8/25 to stop supplying electricity to Lebanon came as a result of this LAF seriousness and also the Cabinet decision authorizing foreign support on the frontier.
END SUMMARY.

BLOCKADE MOVING LEBANON CLOSER TO SYRIA

¶2. (C/NF) Murr said that the blockade is stifling Lebanon, leaving it with no outlet but Syria so that the only country truly benefitting from the situation is Syria. (Note. Murr admitted that he was having to import expensive Italian furniture for his new house through Damascus airport. End Note.) Murr warned that some Syria-sympathetic ministers have even suggested formalizing an arrangement with Syria for Lebanese goods coming through Damascus airport, pushing the two countries back together. He said that more and more people are now blaming the U.S. for the continuation of the blockade, and many believe that Israel might already have

eased the siege if not for U.S. pressure to sustain it. The continued blockade, and official and public Lebanese anger, could undercut support for other initiatives, such as the ongoing LAF deployment.

AIRPORT IS FIRST PRIORITY

13. (C/NF) The reopening of the airport, an installation for which Murr claims he is personally responsible, is the most pressing issue. Murr says he is absolutely certain of the new security procedures at the airport. The Ambassador pressed Murr for specifics. Murr replied that not only has a key LAF brigade at the airport been replaced by the Internal Security Forces (ISF), which are close to Saad Hariri, but he has personally picked "a cell of the best seven Christian officers" from the LAF's G2 intelligence branch who will be able to "check anything, anytime at the airport." What about the suspect Surete Generale (SG), asked the Ambassador, which would still control immigration and could therefore wave through suspect travelers? Murr said the SG will still manage immigration, but that the ISF will check passengers both "before and after" passport control, and the "seven-Christian-officers cell" will conduct spotchecks on the SG. "We can check 100 per cent at the airport," Murr assured, "I am certain of it. We have to open the airport this week. Let the people breathe." Quizzed by the Ambassador, Murr said that, if the airport could be reopened soon, he believes the GOL could agree to a phased process on cargo. For example, no cargo flights would be allowed in from Tehran for the time being.

GERMAN HELP ON THE BORDER

BEIRUT 00002772 002 OF 004

14. (C/NF) Describing the lead-up to the 8/24 Cabinet meeting which authorized PM Siniora to request foreign assistance, Murr said he had received a call from UN envoy Terje Roed-Larsen in Israel saying that Defense Minister Peretz "wants 300 Germans under UN flag supervising along the border." Murr countered with his plan - 30 towers interspersed every ten kilometers along the 300km border with sophisticated radar, camera, and computer equipment. Each tower would have Lebanese and German officers present to monitor each zone and to call in any suspicious activity. A special response unit - two brigades of LAF commandoes - would be always at the ready to respond to these calls.

15. (C/NF) This would not need to be a manpower-intensive operation (in fact, it would free up 5000 of the current 8600 LAF troops stationed along the border to redeploy to the South, providing relief to the troops there). However, it would require sophisticated technology, which the Germans - under a UN flag - could provide along with training, and would have to be set up in "2 to 3 months" to allow for the above-mentioned troop redeployments before they get snowed in for the winter in the northern mountains. According to Murr, Larsen reacted positively to the plan.

16. (C/NF) Having spoken to PM Siniora beforehand, Murr brought his proposal before the Cabinet on 8/24. He said the atmosphere during the session was poisonous with anti-U.S. feeling due to the blockade. "For some reason," said Murr, "Siniora opened the meeting by saying the Israelis and the U.S. have 'told us' to secure the border." This caused a furious uproar from the Shi'a ministers and, as Murr tells it, the session descended into histrionics for a time, with Siniora pacing back-and-forth red-faced and fuming while - surprisingly, given his squawky press conferences - President Lahoud presided quietly over everything.

17. (C/NF) "Then," Murr said, with a touch of bravado, "I stepped in." Murr told the Cabinet of the Larsen call and his refusal of the Israeli demand for 300 Germans along the

border, saying he would never except foreigners to "observe" the LAF. "I told the ministers that I just need sophisticated equipment and some German support," said Murr, "I said it should be Germans because they are trusted by Hizballah (due to German mediation in the Hizballah-Israel prisoner swap of early 2004)." Hizballah Energy Minister Muhammad Fneich apparently replied, "Yes, the Germans are okay with us."

¶8. (C/NF) The Ambassador asked how quickly the Germans could move once requested. Murr replied that in his experience the German military could move fast, though he isn't sure about the political obstacles. He said he had a meeting with a German delegation prior to the Cabinet decision during which they agreed in principle to support the LAF. Murr stressed that, "They will be under the UN flag, they will bring equipment, and they are willing to be on the border." Murr said that the 30 border towers and radar systems would take "three weeks" to install.

LAF CAPABILITY

¶9. (C/NF) Murr asserted that "for the time being" the frontier is secure with 8600 LAF troops stationed along it as well as checkpoints set up on the border and further into Lebanon. He produced a map showing checkpoint locations. In the flatter North, the checkpoints are concentrated right along the border. Along the longer, more mountainous eastern frontier, checkpoints are away from the border at the foot of the mountains in the Bekaa Valley. The LAF recently stopped two trucks coming from Syria with eleven rockets. Murr suspects this was a test by the Syrians to see if the LAF is serious about its mission, and that there is now "no attempt to resupply rockets to Hizballah." (Note. Referring to the Syrian decision on 8/25 to cease supplying additional electricity to Lebanon, Murr said, "This is why Bashar cut the electricity. He realized the LAF is serious." Murr also called the Ambassador after the meeting to tell him that the Syrians had started blocking and harrassing Lebanese truck traffic at the border, perhaps as a response to the Cabinet's decision. End Note).

BEIRUT 00002772 003 OF 004

¶10. (C/NF) During the meeting, Murr received a call from General Sleiman saying that the LAF had just stopped a truck full of light weapons that Hizballah was trying to ship from the South to the Bekaa Valley. The LAF confiscated the weapons and arrested three people. (Comment. This call might have been staged for our benefit, except that Murr, who put his phone down when it rang initially, only took the call at the Ambassador's insistence. End Comment)

¶11. (C/NF) Murr swears that his orders in the South and along the border are "being executed perfectly" and that the LAF is "really checking people." He confided that Hizballah's field commander in the South, Nabil Qaouk, recently called the G2 chief George Khoury requesting permits for pistols for his bodyguards. Khoury refused the request, he says, and told Qaouk that if his bodyguards were seen carrying pistols, even with the permit, that the LAF would arrest them, and confiscate "the pistol and the permit." The Ambassador expressed some disbelief on this story, which Murr insisted was true -- and demonstrates, in Murr's view, that the LAF is doing its job seriously.

¶12. (C/NF) Murr explained that the LAF has the right to stop and search any vehicle without a warrant. If they go to search a private home, they have to get the approval of the military prosecutor-general, Jean Fahd, who works directly for Murr. They do not require a warrant from a civilian court. The LAF can therefore act quickly on any tip-offs. If the USG has any information, Murr asked that it be passed officially through UNIFIL, but that the Embassy could simultaneously call the LAF with the information, "just to

forewarn us."

¶13. (C/NF) Murr said that the LAF's situation in the South is not comfortably established, and that there are currently 5,500 soldiers there sleeping "on the roads and in their tanks," with yet a further 10,000 poised to deploy from north of the Litani. He hopes the LAF can get the gear it needs quickly, though he noted that the Saudis have pledged \$500 million and the Kuwaitis a further \$300 million in support to the LAF and ISF. Murr told them to hold the money "until I know exactly what I need."

SEAPORT

¶14. (C/NF) Murr assured the Ambassador again that the land borders and the airport are under control. He admitted that the seaport is still a week or so away from being secure and having an effective monitoring system. Once the airport is open, the GOL hopes to bring in two already-purchased container scanners - one from Egypt and one from Jordan - to install at the port of Beirut. Additionally, Murr said the GOL may request international "UN-hatted" support - mentioning specifically the French and the Germans - with patrolling outside of the port and searching suspect vessels. When the Ambassador asked if the Cabinet had also approved international support for marine patrols, Murr hesitated a little before saying that it had.

¶15. (C/NF) The Ambassador asked if security with the port is trustworthy. Even with high-tech equipment, a Hizballah-sympathizer could still simply wave through a container full of weapons. Murr said this wouldn't be a problem as he plans to place another G2 cell - like that at the airport - to watch over the port workers. Further, the Lebanese customs authority (run by Assaad Ghanem - "a very honest man") are under the Ministry of Finance (Hariri-allied) and are widely-regarded as highly scrupulous and professional. (Note: Certainly, the customs service employees have been most diligent in stopping pirated goods at the air and seaports -- customs is one bright spot in Lebanon's otherwise lackluster IPR regime. But we do not know if customs officials will henceforth be equally diligent in stopping rockets. End note.)

COMMENT

¶16. (C/NF) Though clearly embellishing on some of the details - as is his wont - Murr seems nevertheless firmly

BEIRUT 00002772 004 OF 004

committed to carrying through on his proposals for the airport, port, and frontier. By most accounts, Murr played a key role in securing the LAF deployment to the South, as he promised he would do. Not one to succumb to false modesty, Murr clearly enjoys the historic role he sees himself as playing, and that's something that we can use. Murr's comments on the atmosphere inside the Cabinet give us pause, as even our Lebanese friends are beginning to ask questions about why the Israeli blockade has gone on for so long and average Lebanese unfortunately have the misperception that the U.S. is prodding the Israelis on.

FELTMAN